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**Marian Most Bold:  
Feminine Transgression in the Greenwood**

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**Marion Most Bold:  
Feminine Transgression in the Greenwood**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

### **Marion Most Bold: Feminine Transgression in the Greenwood**

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In my project, I focus on the role and depiction of women found in the Robin Hood greenwood: specifically, those of Maid Marian. Maid Marian rarely appears in early Robin Hood texts, and especially not in a capacity in which she herself speaks, so it is striking that today she has become almost as synonymous with the greenwood in Robin Hood tales as the man himself. Indeed, one of the rare instances in which Marian plays a lead role occurs in the seventeenth-century ballad “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” which appears in only one manuscript, after the original Robin Hood ballads of the Middle Ages, and does not seem to have been popular. This seventeenth-century ballad allots Maid Marian an agency typically reserved only for Robin’s merry men. Though I agree that Marian exhibits certain transgressive behaviors, especially in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” by the end of Robin Hood texts—medieval, early modern, or otherwise—though the space of the greenwood allows a certain level of freedom for the men in the texts, the “good” women in the Robin Hood texts

remain noble ladies who still act as they ought to even though they live outside the confines of civilized society. The same social rules of urban society continue to apply to them, and even in the few cases where the women get to demonstrate more traditionally masculine qualities, they still must end up back in their proper role at the end of the Robin Hood ballad or play.

## Table of Contents

Text .....	1
Bibliography .....	27

William Clarke Wontner's portrait of Maid Marian painted in 1895 presents us with a pastoral representation of the legendary figure. Marian stands in what appears to be a forest or meadow, surrounded by dark, brown-black trees so that the light focuses directly on her, and she looks almost angelic. She wears noble clothing, with hints of gold detailing around the neck, and what appears to be red silk lining the sleeves over her arms. She holds pale pink flowers delicately in her hands, and draped equally as delicately around her neck lies a ruby studded cross. This Maid Marian looks every part the noble lady, except for a small hint of daring mischief in her eyes, complete with a slightly cocked eyebrow. She is, in almost every way, the Maid Marian audiences of the Middle Ages, popular culture, and contemporary films have come to expect: demure, stately, angelic. But, Maid Marian rarely appears in early Robin Hood texts, and especially not in a capacity in which she herself speaks, so it is striking that today she has become almost as synonymous with the greenwood in Robin Hood tales as the man himself. Indeed, one of the rare instances in which Marian plays a lead role occurs in the seventeenth-century ballad "Robin Hood and Maid Marian," which appears in only one manuscript, after the original Robin Hood ballads of the Middle Ages, and does not seem to have been popular.<sup>1</sup>

In order to write about Robin Hood, one must first come to terms with the impossibility of locating tales about the literary outlaw in any one particular historical period. How can one write on the medieval Robin Hood without also referencing Robin Hood in the Renaissance, and vice-versa? In true outlaw fashion, Robin Hood evades categorization as much as he evades the king—he

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Knight, "Introduction to Robin Hood and Maid Marian," in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Olghren (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 493.

always finds himself back in the forest, waiting for the next writer to attempt to pin him down. Robin Hood is one of the medieval figures who gains more popularity with the passage of time; rather than fading into obscurity, Robin remains as popular today as he was centuries ago. Part of Robin's appeal comes from the fact that the character comes to stand for a variety of different resistance movements or reforms. In his monograph *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw*, Stephen Knight points out this important feature of the character:

Robin need not only be a brave representative of resistance, whether yeoman or noble. He can also figure structures that are themselves in conflict with other orders of authority. He can stand for the medieval Catholic church or for a reformed version of it; he can symbolize a repentant revolutionary in 1661, or form an anti-mercantile myth of escape for Victorians and Georgians...But his party can also be oppositional in a more disruptive way—the social bandit side of Robin recurs as a model for Jacobean rural dissidents or Tom Paine-ish revolutionism in the 1790s; later it can act as a legitimation of 1930s leftism or in the present...a faith in the ecological future.<sup>2</sup>

This, in part, explains why the medieval figure gained such popularity in the early modern world: the rise of political and class dissonance. Robin became what people under political or social pressure needed him to be. The medieval Robin Hood corpus features a set of issues and concerns that weave their way through the ballads and later plays; these concerns stay relevant, in part, because like

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study of the English Outlaw* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 5.



the figure of Robin himself, they so easily transition from one century to the next. These issues include (but are not limited to) the changing status of the yeoman (or any lower social class) and its relationship with nobility, the relationship between urban spaces and the greenwood, and criticism against the clergy.

However, the issue I focus on in my project is the role and depiction of women. On Maid Marian, Sherron Lux writes “[when] Marian does appear, she generally challenges accepted gender roles in some way, either openly or subtly—and even a subtle challenge can lead to some discomfort on the part of the status quo.”<sup>3</sup> I agree that Marian exhibits certain masculine, “transgressive” behaviors, especially in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian”; however, by the end of Robin Hood texts—medieval, early modern, or otherwise—even though the space of the greenwood allows a certain level of freedom for the men in the texts, the “good” women in the Robin Hood texts remain noble ladies who still act as they ought to even though they live outside the confines of civilized society. The same social rules of urban society continue to apply to them, and even in the few cases where the women get to demonstrate more traditionally masculine qualities, they still must end up back in their proper role at the end of the Robin Hood ballad or play.

In discussing Robin Hood and the women in the Robin Hood corpus, I take a transhistorical approach. In order to discuss the role of women in the Robin Hood mythos, one must look towards the later works, because earlier medieval ballads written about the noble outlaw focus on homosocial relationships between Robin and his band of outlaws. Female figures stay in the

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<sup>3</sup> Sherron Lux, “Maid Marian’s Transgressive Identities,” *Medieval Perspectives* 13 (1998): 84

periphery in the medieval ballads. They may haunt the tales, particularly in the fifteenth-century Robin Hood ballad, *A Gest of Robyn Hood*, where Robin frequently invokes the Virgin Mary, who appears almost as a virtual courtly lady for Robin. The women in this text either guide Robin spiritually, or kill him. “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” remains one of the few seventeenth-century Robin Hood ballads in which a woman is featured more centrally. In this ballad, Maid Marian has an agency typically reserved only for Robin’s merry men. This agency, however, leaves her as soon as we reach Anthony Munday’s seventeenth-century plays, *The Downfall of Robert, Earle of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earle of Huntington*, wherein Marian, though not silent, exists only as a figure always adjacent to that of Robin Hood: the agency she exhibits relies solely on how the results may benefit Robin.

My main focus lies in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” which is an eighty-nine-line ballad—a form that resists definition almost as much as Robin resists authority. Ballads, which contain an “essential insubstantiality,” are derived from oral tradition and rely on scribal “transmission across time.”<sup>4</sup> Though oftentimes lyrical in nature, ballads are too long to be considered lyrics—and too short to be considered epics. They exist somewhere in between these two forms; oftentimes, they have a narrative that they follow, and would have been performed. The performative quality of ballads derives from early medieval genres that helped

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<sup>4</sup> Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study*, 44. Thirty-eight of the ballads that we have in the canon come from F. J. Child’s collection *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* because, as Knight writes, “Most of the important Robin Hood ballads exist in single copies in small, battered prints and even less impressive manuscripts” (44). This aids in the inability to recover the source of the Robin Hood canon. For more on the nature of the Robin Hood ballads, see David C. Fowler’s *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad*.

create what would become the popular fourteenth and fifteenth-century ballad. David C. Fowler defines the ballad as a “special narrative form within the larger context of folksong, of which it has become a part.”<sup>5</sup> The coming together of traditional folksongs along with medieval minstrelsy helped develop the ballad, as minstrels—in order to make a living with popular audiences—rewrote old, chivalric stories in a style that eventually became the ballad.<sup>6</sup> Ballads have narrative features, because the narrative structure allowed for easier mnemonic techniques for the minstrel.<sup>7</sup> Karin Boglund-Logopoulos adds that the method of ballad transmission “is essential to the modern concept of the ballad” because “in later centuries it is primarily its life in oral tradition which marks the ballad as literature of the ‘people’ and as distinct from the written genres of upper-class culture.”<sup>8</sup> These texts ‘of the people’ can be broken into a series of subgroups: historical ballads, outlaw ballads, humorous ballads, spell ballads, and romantic ballads. These subgroups oftentimes overlap and share common themes—most likely due to the oral transmission that helped develop the ballads.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> David C Fowler. *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>7</sup> For a look into how early ballads were constructed in order to aid memorization, I found James H. Jones’ article “Commonplace and Memorization in the Oral Tradition of the English and Scottish Popular Ballads” helpful in its discussion on how those who performed the ballad from memory would have used certain “commonplace” phrases in order to make sure they told the story in chronological order.

<sup>8</sup> Karin Boglund-Logopoulos. “The Medieval Ballads: Textual Problems of Popular Literature,” in *New Approaches to Medieval Textuality*, ed. Mickle Dave Ledgerwood (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1998), 41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

What type of ballad, then, is the seventeenth-century “Robin Hood and Maid Marian”? It is most definitively an outlaw ballad, with slight historical features, and considerable pastoral elements. The pastoral components in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” bear a faint resemblance to the thirteenth-century play *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion*, written by Adam de la Halle. Though no link has been proven between the Old French *pastourelle* dramatization and the Robin Hood canon, it is productive to look at the similarities between the shepherdess Marion and her lover Robin. *Le Jeu de Robin et de Marion* opens with a knight approaching a shepherdess, and attempting to seduce her. This shepherdess, Marion, refuses his advances in a way that “breaks through the limitations of her lyric persona to assert her voice and to enter into a new relationship with both her poet-creator and the audience who witnesses her experiences.”<sup>10</sup> This agency on Marion’s behalf gives the shepherdess a level of authority particular to de la Halle’s *pastourelle*: she refuses both consensual sexual relations and rape, which is atypical compared to other *pastourelles*.<sup>11</sup> As Lux writes, “Adam’s spunky shepherdess insists on her own personhood, here partly defined by social class as she refuses to be dazzled by the possibility of an amour with a member of the aristocracy, happy to be loved by one of her own social standing.”<sup>12</sup> Just as the greenwood in the seventeenth-century “Robin

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<sup>10</sup> Geri L. Smith, “Marion’s Merry Resistance: Implications of Theatralization in Adam de la Halle’s *Le Jeu de Robin et Marion*.” *Women in French Studies* 8 (2000): 16.

<sup>11</sup> Smith credits the theatre for this moment of individuality over the stock characteristics that the shepherdess ought to have had: “Marion is no longer an anonymous, on-dimensional literary convention. She is now the object of the spectator’s gaze, but she cannot be appropriated by it. The material reality of her body on stage will not allow that” (17).

<sup>12</sup> Lux, “Transgressive Identities,” 86.

Hood and Maid Marion” allows Marion a certain flexibility of character, the stage allows the shepherdess autonomy in an instance where she ought not to have it—particularly in light of her lower social standing compared to the knight. In a way, she defies her genre, refusing to act in a conventional manner.

“Robin Hood and Maid Marian” falls into the ballad grouping in the Robin Hood canon that is best described as the “Robin hood meets his match” group: these ballads strengthen the outlaw band, and indicate “that Robin is not leader of his band by simple physical power and skill, but by consensus.”<sup>13</sup> The difference lies in that in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” the ‘boy’ that Robin comes across, who manages to challenge him and withstand his punches, happens to be a woman. The ballad begins by describing Marian as a “bonny fine maid of a noble degree” who is “a gallant dame / For favour and face, and beauty most rare, / Queen Hellen shee did excell.”<sup>14</sup> This sets Marian up nicely as the maiden of pastoral poetry, whose loveliness exceeds almost every other earthly beauty—including the classical Helen, famed with such an exceptional face that she started a war. By having Marian surpass Helen’s classical beauty, “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” allows for the creation of an English national beauty. The text continues by splitting up the two lovers, and Marian actively decides to dress herself “like a page” and “[range] the wood to find Robin Hood”: complete with “quiver and bow, sword, buckler, and all, / Thus armed was Marian

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<sup>13</sup> Knight, *Robin Hood: A Complete Study*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> “Robin and Maid Marian,” in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. by Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Olghren (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), lines 1, 5-7 respectively).

*most bold.*"<sup>15</sup> In a reversal of a high-born beauty, Marian dons the dress of a lower class page, and arms herself. Not only does she know where the weapons are kept in the greenwood, but more importantly, she knows how to arm herself without the help of others. In this way, the text suggests that Marian has performed masculinity before, or at the very least has spent some time with swords and bows enough to know how to handle them.

Soon after, Marian comes across the equally disguised Robin, so that both do not recognize each other. This disguise brings to mind Shakespeare's sixteenth-century play, *As You Like It*, wherein "a young woman disguises herself as a youth and enters the forest, where she encounters her lover—her lover, who fails to recognize her in her boy-disguise, even as Robin Hood fails to recognize his own 'bonny fine maid.'"<sup>16</sup> Though this is a theme that we see time and time again in medieval and early modern texts, the fact that Marian takes on a disguise, when usually only Robin or one of his merry men does, is fascinating. She does not just run after him—a smart decision, because without masculine garb and weapons, Marian would merely be a noble woman alone in the forest. Soon, Marian and Robin draw their swords, still disguised, and fight for over an hour, both wounded in some capacity as they spar. In this ballad, when Marian is allowed to speak and act of her own accord, she is as capable as Robin with a sword and bow, and does not yield during their fight until she hears him speak. We see here how the space Marian occupies in the greenwood allows her a certain flexibility of dress and gender dynamics—Marian gets to play the part of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, lines 31, 32, and 34-35 respectively, emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> Lux, "Transgressive Identities," 87.

outlaw just the same as Robin. In his introduction to the text, Stephen Knight writes:

Structurally the interesting thing about *Robin Hood and Maid Marian* is that it shows the only credible way to join the outlaw band is to fight a draw with the leader: this is a "Robin Hood meets his match" ballad in a wider sense than usual. Foolish as commentators have found it, the notion of the hero's fight with his lover is a potent one, *whether it testifies to the woman's possible martial skill*, or the enormity of mistreating woman, or both at once.<sup>17</sup>

The text does not provide any background as to Marian's place among Robin and his merry men, so while one can infer that she lives with them and seems to be a part of the company (evident in that she knows where to find the necessary accouterments in order to disguise herself), Marian cannot act like an *outlaw* until she fights Robin to a standstill.

The text allows Marian to prove that she too can be a skilled fighter, thus allowing her to exist in the Robin Hood mythos as more than just his "gallant dame." Drawing from Marjorie Garber's note that cross-dressing (or, transvestitism) "*is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crises of category itself," Sherron Lux makes the argument that Marian disrupts categories as we see a beautiful young woman disguised as a page-boy who enters the forbidden forest alone and fights like

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Knight, "Introduction to 'Robin Hood and Maid Marian,'" page 493. Emphasis added.

a man rather than like the boy she appears to be or the woman she actually is—that is, she is not like the Shakespearean crossed-dressed comic heroine who, like Viola, attempts to avoid armed conflict or who, like Rosalind, swoons at the sight of her lover's blood.<sup>18</sup>

This alone makes the ballad worth studying and comparing to the rest of the Robin Hood canon—though appearing in a single manuscript, which may suggest its lack of popularity, the ballad allows Maid Marian the space to actively become a member of the band of outlaws and gives her a freedom of choice that she does not receive in other Robin Hood ballads or plays. Marian “disrupts” just as Adam de la Halle’s *pastourelle* shepherdess disrupts and refuses the knight’s amorous advances. Evelyn M. Perry argues in favor of Marian’s convincing disguise, stating that her cross-dressing allows her to “discover” herself as a female hero, and that the failure of Robin Hood critics “to address the potential...of the female hero puts us in danger of acquiescing with literary and social roles for women that do not take account of the innate heroic qualities—courage, intellect, strength—of the female characters who appear in these materials.”<sup>19</sup> Once Marian is outside of her constructed gender identity, she becomes a confident, independent character.

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<sup>18</sup> Lux, “Transgressive Identities,” 88. Emphasis original. The parallels between the Robin Hood canon and Shakespeare’s comedies, particularly when it comes to women cross-dressing as men, provide an interesting insight into Maid Marian in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian.” If interested in this topic, see Nancy Hayles’s article “*Sexual Disguise in As You Like It*.”

<sup>19</sup> Evelyn M. Perry, “Disguising and Revealing the Female Hero’s Identity: Cross-dressing in the Ballad of Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (2000): 194 and 191 respectively. As



The caveat here, of course, is that Marian only gets to act in such a fashion while Robin is away, or when she does not recognize him. Once she identifies him during their duel, she immediately drops her sword and embraces him “with kisses sweet... / Like to a most loyall lover”—once again reverting back to the role of a courtly mistress.<sup>20</sup> With Robin Hood present, she need not disguise herself, because she is once more under the protection and guidance of her lover. Yet, in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” Marian successfully dons the persona of an outlaw—as successfully as, or almost more successfully than Robin Hood himself. She proves herself to be more than just a pretty face, and this brief moment suggests she could be one of the most dangerous members of the Sherwood company, if allowed to actively chameleon back-and-forth between courtly mistress and capable outlaw. Perhaps the text suggests that the most dangerous quality these women exhibit comes from their ability to move in and out of their defined gender roles, once let out of the periphery. When they act the role of noble lady, they behave exactly as they ought to; conversely, when they take on masculine behaviors, they enact that role as well (if not better) than their male counterparts. Marian’s persona of an outlaw must, by the end of the text, dissipate in order to give the power back to Robin.

### **Transgressing the Law**

The Robin Hood canon imparts a romanticized view of what it means to be out of law. In his book *The Outlaws of Medieval England*, Maurice Keen

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with Lux, Perry builds her argument off of Marjorie Garber’s *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*.

<sup>20</sup> “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” lines 52-53.

discusses the harsh reality of being an outlaw: “As an outcast from society, he (and sometimes she) was denied the ‘ancient inherited privileges at law’ and was marked as ‘civilly dead.’”<sup>21</sup> An outlaw in the thirteenth-century became known as having “the price of a wolf’s head,” which is to say that the outlaw could be hunted and his corpse brought in for a reward.<sup>22</sup> Outlaws lived in dangerous territory, unable to turn to any of their old companions for help. However, for literary figures such as Robin Hood, the forests become not a place of menace and danger, but instead a sanctuary, and an “asylum from the tyranny of evil lords and a corrupt law.”<sup>23</sup> The forest can protect outlaws from those who might try either to turn them in or kill them for a reward. Within the greenwood, Robin and his men could play by their own rules and create their own forest law completely separate from the king.

We see the importance of the forest to the fictional outlaws of Barnsdale in a striking moment in the medieval ballad *A Gest of Robyn Hood*, which occurs when the people of Nottingham watch as Robin and his company come into town

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<sup>21</sup> Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 9. For further information on the difference between outlaws and social bandits (two titles usually attributed to Robin Hood), *Bandits* by Eric Hobsbawm looks at the relationship between outlaws and social bandits, and defines social bandits as “heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped, and supposed.” Hobsbawm’s social bandit is a product of civil unrest within the boundaries of agrarian societies (*Bandits* 11).

<sup>22</sup> Hanawalt, “Portraits of Outlaws, Felons, and Rebels in Late Medieval England,” in *British Outlaws of Literature and History: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Figures from Robin Hood to Twm Shon Catty*, ed. Alexander L. Kaufman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 46.

<sup>23</sup> Keen, 2.

with the king and some of the king's men—all of whom are clad in green clothing, symbolic of the forest that accompanies Robin wherever he goes.<sup>24</sup> The text tells us that:

All the people of Notyngham  
They stode and behelde;  
They sawe nothyng but mantels of grene  
That covered all the felde.

Than every man to other gan say,  
"I drede our kynge be slone:  
Come Robyn Hode to the towne, iwys  
On lyve he lefte never one." (lines 1705-1712)

Immediately after seeing the "mantels of grene," these townsfolk fear for the life of their king, and thus the life of their urban values, with the arrival of Robin Hood. The absence of the king concurrent with Robin's appearance in their city indicates a level of change to their way of living and instantly destabilizes the townsfolk's sense of security, because of the violence attached to Robin's

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<sup>24</sup> The *Gest*, dated sometime between 1400 and 1450, was set down after the height of the medieval English forest system under the Norman kings. With the system in decline due to Edward III's death, the "control of the Crown over what remained of the Forest administration dwindled away" (Grant 170). Edward IV attempted to restore the forest to its previous state under the Crown, but quickly realized that the authority necessary to prevent landowners and lawless individuals from entering the forests was no longer present. For more on the medieval forest system, see Richard Almond's *Medieval Hunting*; Roland Bechmann's *Trees and Man: the Forest in the Middle Ages*; Christine Carpenter's "Law, Justice, and Landowners in Late Medieval England"; and Raymond Grant's *The Royal Forests of England*.

person. As soon as they see Robin, they flee from his sight; it is only when they notice their king underneath his green garments that they return and feel safe once again.

For a year, Robin lives as a respectable man in the town, still in close proximity to the king, when he decides, after spending most of his money “Both for knyghtes and for squyres, / To gete hym grete renowne” to return to Barnsdale.<sup>25</sup> When Robin returns to live in the greenwood, he rejects the courtly luxuries granted to him during his stay with the king. He arrives in the greenwood to the sound of “byrdes mery syngynge” and reflects on the time that has passed since he was last there.<sup>26</sup> He longingly wishes to “shote / At the donne dere” and quickly kills a “full grete harte”—an action that physically and actively severs the ties between himself and the king that had formed in Robin’s time at the royal court.<sup>27</sup> Medieval forest laws decreed that stags were royal property, so the killing of the stag is in direct contravention of the king’s laws.<sup>28</sup> After killing the deer, Robin then announces his presence in the wood:

His horne than gan he blow,  
That all the outlawes of that forest  
That horne coud they knowe,

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<sup>25</sup> *A Gest of Robin Hood*, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Olghren (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 1735-1736.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, line 1780.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1783-1785.

<sup>28</sup> *The Royal Forests of England* by Raymond Grant helped inform and frame my reading of Robin’s actions in the forest, and will prove beneficial to any wishing to know more about how criminal charges could be brought against those who hunted and killed in the king’s forests.

And gadred them togyder,  
In a lytell throwe;  
Seven score of wyght yonge men  
Came redy on a rowe.<sup>29</sup>

The actions Robin takes in slaying the deer and blowing the horn alerts the outlaws that he has returned to the greenwood: Robin must first announce himself as an outlaw in order for the men to emerge from the forest and greet him, and he re-establishes himself in Barnsdale once again.

How does Marian fit into this outlaw band, then, once we move past the original medieval Robin Hood ballads? We know that the life of the outlaw is dangerous—both for the outlaw himself, as well as those he might run into, and the *Gest* reflects this danger in that strange little moment when Robin Hood first arrives in the city. As a woman, what does it mean that Marian lives with this group of outlaws in the greenwood? The seventeenth-century ballad “Robin Hood and Maid Marian depicts Marian as a nobly born lady who finds herself separated from her lover, Robin Hood, when “soon they were forced to part; / To the merry green wood then went Robin Hood, / With a sad and sorrowfull heart.”<sup>30</sup> Following Robin’s departure to the greenwood, Marian “perplexed and vexed, and troubled in mind, / ...drest her self like a page, / And ranged the wood to find Robin Hood.”<sup>31</sup> Marian does not enter the greenwood until she is so aggravated by her situation, she feels she has to—though still keeping in mind the fact that she could not enter the greenwood without the garb of a man. By

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<sup>29</sup> *Gest*, lines 1777-1792.

<sup>30</sup> “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” lines 23-25.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-32.

deciding to cross-dress as a page, Marian shows the reader the danger of wandering around a forest where a band of known outlaws lives.

Marian's role as a woman living amongst outlaws would have been a rare occurrence in the Middle Ages. Extensive research by Barbara Hanawalt has shown that female felons appear less frequently than males in the medieval public record.<sup>32</sup> Hanawalt questions whether or not women are "the gentle creatures that chivalric literature of all centuries assumed them to be, or [if] they [committed] just as many crimes as men but [got] caught less frequently."<sup>33</sup> She goes on to write that literary, chronicle, and epistolary sources provide conflicting images of women. On the one hand there are the helpless damsels in courtly romances who are prone to victimization by giants, while on the other hand there are women, like Margaret Paston, who commanded the defense of a manor house against siege or, like the wife of Edward II, who led a successful *coup d'état*.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> In the article, "The Female Felon in Fourteenth-Century England," Hanawalt uses gaol delivery rolls from Norfolk, Yorkshire, and Northamptonshire from 1300-1348, as well as coroners' rolls to study felonious cases that involved women.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Hanawalt, "The Female Felon in Fourteenth-Century England," *Viator* 5 (1974): 254.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 255. Hanawalt discusses three popular explanations for women's lack of participation in criminal activity in her essay "Women Before the Law: Females as Felons and Prey in Fourteenth-Century England," wherein she states: "Three basic explanations have been offered for women's low participation in crime: women commit as many crimes as men but are not indicted as frequently; women are biologically and psychologically less prone to violence (the nature argument); and, finally, women are socialized to be more docile and law-abiding than men and are given fewer criminal opportunities (the nurture argument)" (165).

The question of how women ought to behave is easily answerable given the plethora of good women found in medieval literary texts, including post-medieval renditions of the noble Maid Marian. Medieval women were to be chaste, honest, fair, pious, devoted to both God and their husband, and dutifully domestic. To behave in any other way would have been incredibly difficult for women, who relied heavily on the men in their lives to protect them both physically and financially. This may explain why Marian must lay down her sword for Robin at the end of the seventeenth-century ballad “Robin Hood and Maid Marian.” If women did engage in criminal activity, they could not be outlawed, because, in the first place, “a woman could not belong to a frankpledge or a tithing, as did all males over the age of twelve, [so] she could not be considered ‘in law’ and therefore could not be ‘outlawed.’” Women, then, were considered “waived.” However, though women could not be considered outlaws in name, once they were waived they lost the same rights that outlaws lost; they were regarded as abandoned by their family and community, and would be denied full legal protection.<sup>35</sup>

The crimes women committed (which have been recorded) stayed generally within the realm of burglary, larceny, and receiving of stolen goods; these crimes tended to occur close to home, and both wandering women, as well as female robbers, were atypical.<sup>36</sup> It was also atypical for women to join

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<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Brewer, “Let Her Be Waived: Outlawing Women in Yorkshire, 1293-1294,” in *British Outlaws of Literature and History: Essays on Medieval and Early Modern Figures from Robin Hood to Twm Shon Catty*, ed. Alexander L. Kaufman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011): 30. In the article, Brewer quotes from English jurist Henry de Bracton’s *Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae* concerning a woman’s inability to be considered an outlaw.

<sup>36</sup> Hanawalt, “Women Before the Law Females as Felons and Prey in

outlawed groups, if only because they had no training with weaponry such as bows and arrows, and it would have placed them in a dangerous situation to be so removed from a society as to live with a group of rogues in the woods.<sup>37</sup> If women were to be involved in such a group, such women “comprised only 4.6 percent of the membership...[and] were usually described as wife or sister of one of the members.”<sup>38</sup> It would have been atypical, then, for Marian “most bold” to deftly yield the bow and arrow in the aforementioned seventeenth-century ballad “Robin Hood and Maid Marian.”<sup>39</sup> It also explains why Marian does not appear in the Robin Hood canon until the seventeenth-century—women’s roles in a band of outlaws were rare, so the authors of the texts may not have thought it necessary to include a love interest for Robin, particularly when the texts focused so heavily on his men.

### **Women in the Wood**

What lies in the forest? Depending on the text, the forest could contain magic or danger, adventure or terror. The forests of medieval romances contain dwarves, enchantresses, fey, and giants; young knights traverse the unruly paths, often stumbling upon adventure and the chance to prove their chivalric prowess. One of the women that Robin stumbles upon one day is Clorinda,

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Fourteenth-Century England,” in *Women And The Law: A Social Historical Perspective*, ed. by D. Kelly Wesiberg (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing, 1982), 190.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 174. While women were not trained in weapons of warfare, Hanawalt does make it clear that they did know how to use other weapons that could inflict mortal injury, such as knives, hatchets, and other instruments used for daily tasks.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>39</sup> “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” line 35.



another Marian-esque character who appears in the seventeenth-century ballad “Robin Hood’s Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage.” In this moderately well-known text, Clorinda is the queen of the shepherds, and the text portrays her as a pastoral figure in gowns of deep green, sitting in the middle of a forest. In description, Clorinda echoes the Marian that William Clarke Wotner painted, but her actions are much more masculine, as she hunts and wields weapons like Marian in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian.” When Robin happens upon her, he asks Clorinda why she leaves him to go into the forest; her answer is “To kill a fat buck, / For Tomorrow is Titbury day.”<sup>40</sup> Robin, assuming she cannot handle the physical strain of hunting, asks her to wander away with him to rest a while, but as they happen upon a herd of bucks while walking towards the trees, he watches as she “chose the fattest [buck] that was in the herd / And she shot him through side and side.”<sup>41</sup> This is quite the shot for a beautiful shepherdess. Surprised, Robin blurts out “By the faith of my body... / I never saw [a] woman like thee.”<sup>42</sup> Usually the one to hunt and kill stags in the forest, Robin cannot believe that such a woman exists who could so expertly take down a deer. The forest is Robin’s terrain, as shown earlier in the medieval *Gest*, when Robin returns from the city and kills the stag. The forest is transmogrified from the forests of England, which are seen as a “tame affair, not really forests at all” and oftentimes man-made, into one of the few spaces that outlaws could hide in

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<sup>40</sup> “Robin Hood’s Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage,” in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Olghren (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), lines 119-120.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 126-127.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 129-130.

safely.<sup>43</sup> Under the protection of the greenwood, Robin and his men can live by the rules they create, rather than living under the rules of the crown. The brief moment with the stag is the only one in the text wherein Clorinda demonstrates the skills the greenwood has allowed her; the next time the audience sees her, she marries Robin and the ballad ends, and she maintains a level of passivity equal to the dormant nature of the forest.

Though it allows for dynamic behavior from the men who live within it, the forest in Robin's tales never changes: it remains in a perpetual summer, the game abundant and the foliage ample enough to conceal the merry men from wandering eyes.<sup>44</sup> The location may change from Barnsdale to Sherwood as the tales progress throughout the centuries, but the forest remains the same. The static nature of the forest aligns with Maid Marian's passive behavior in her relationship with Robin in other tales. Though the forest remains seasonally fixed, Robin does expect it to bring him adventure, in both medieval and post-medieval ballads or stories. We see this occur in the medieval *Gest* when Robin will not dine "Till that I have some bolde baron, / Or som unkouth gest" to entertain him: the forest does indeed entertain Robin's desire for a guest, and brings him Sir Richard of the Lee.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, in the post-medieval ballad "Robin Hood's Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage," the forest presents Robin with a pastoral beauty

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<sup>43</sup> Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 58.

<sup>44</sup> A. J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2004), 57.

<sup>45</sup> *Gest*, lines 23-24.

who demonstrates skills similar to his, but not at the level of Marian in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian.”

These two seventeenth-century texts—“Robin Hood and Maid Marian” and “Robin Hood’s Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage”—play well together, and offer insight into instances where the forest allows for more flexible character traits to be attached to women. These traits, though, always give way to the reinstatement of appropriate female behaviors. Just as Marian eventually stops fighting with Robin and proves herself to be the loyal lover, at the end of “Robin Hood’s Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage,” Clorinda and Robin marry—in quite the pastoral scene:

And then, as bold Robin Hood and his sweet bride  
Went hand in hand to the green bower,  
The birds sung with pleasure in merry Sherwood,  
And ‘twas a most joyful hour.<sup>46</sup>

The text may be suggesting that women can only assert themselves in the wood if they are alone or believe themselves to be in danger—and it allows the space for them to play the role of skilled hunter, but only until they get married, or only until it is revealed that the person they fight is their lover in disguise. There is an expiration date for flexibility for women in Robin Hood’s forest that does not exist for either the outlaw or his men. One could argue that this reinstatement of appropriate feminine behavior through marriage was due to the popularity of the Robin Hood tales in the seventeenth-century. This popularity could become a problem if life had begun to imitate art. Discussing a fifteenth-century petition, A.

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<sup>46</sup> “Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage,” lines 197-200.

J. Pollard suggests that, in fact, there was an instance when life began to imitate art. Pollard describes how

In a petition placed before parliament in 1439 the banditry of Piers Venables and his gang of fifteen named yeomen and ‘many other unknowyn’ in the neighbor of Tutbury was likened to that of Robin Hood and his meynie. This was a literary flourish, confidently added, we may suppose, in the knowledge that it would be familiar to its listeners. By the mid-fifteenth-century, so unusual had large roving gangs of bandits apparently become that, rather than Robin Hood and his merry men reflecting what one might describe as the ‘historical reality,’ a local disturbance could be construed for rhetorical effect in Robin Hood terms. Life was beginning to imitate art.<sup>47</sup>

As Robin Hood continued to grow as a literary figure from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, Pollard’s discussion could provide a glimpse as to why the flexibility of women’s actions in the forest always leads them back to their attributed gender roles. This may explain why it is important that Maid Marian not act in a masculine fashion, so as to cause other women to act in the same way. This could have led to inappropriate behavior on the part of women who saw Maid Marian’s actions to be equally as impressive as Robin’s. While I do not think that scores of women would have learned how to yield bows and arrows immediately after reading or listening to “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” I do think that allowing women more freedom of action in such a popular legend as

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<sup>47</sup> Pollard, 96.

Robin Hood's (and the relative popularity of "Robin Hood's Birth, Breeding, Valor, and Marriage" shows that a wider audience would have encountered Clorinda) could be seen as troublesome to those wishing to maintain social control.

## Conclusion

The importance of having women stay within the bounds of their appropriate social and gender confines is shown through one of the most important women in the Robin Hood canon, in Robin Hood's *Gest*—in the woman who kills him. Robin's murderess does not appear until the end of the text, when the text introduces how "he [Robin] was begyled, iwys, / Through a wycked woman, / The pryoresse of Kyrkely, / That nye was of hys kynne."<sup>48</sup> Not only does this woman kill Robin to appease her lover, but she also happens to be a close relation of Robin's. She destroys her familial ties to Robin for another man, in a villainous deception typical of wicked women. The prioress is the one of first women to appear in the medieval canon of Robin Hood tales, aside from the figure of the Virgin Mary who (as I mentioned before) Robin invokes throughout the text, and the prioress only appears once the text has brought Robin back into the forest from his sojourn with the king for twenty-two years of relative peace. One day, Robin decides that he "muste to Kyrkely, / Craftely to be leten blode," and finds himself betrayed by both the prioress and her lover, Sir Roger of Doncaster.<sup>49</sup> As stated, the prioress is one of the only women in the medieval Robin Hood texts to appear, and she has little to no self-agency. She decides to kill Robin, but she kills him for her knight (though we are unsure exactly why).

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<sup>48</sup> *Gest*, lines 1801-1804.

<sup>49</sup> *Gest*, lines 1815-1816.

She appears only in correlation with the knight—though she is introduced first—and only for the last eighteen lines of the *Gest*. This connection of the female character to a male character appears time and time again throughout the Robin Hood corpus: medieval, early modern, and contemporary. This is what makes Marian in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian” such a fascinating character. This Marian ventures into the woods for Robin, yes, but she makes the decision purely out of her own agency.

This agency comes and goes for Marian throughout the rest of the Robin Hood corpus. In the seventeenth-century Munday plays *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington* and *The Death of Robert, Earl of Huntington*, the female character must change her name to Marian from Matilda once she goes into exile with Robin, in order to show nominally that she has changed from one “person” to another, because of her change in legal status—she does not, however, change in action or behavior: “Why, she is called Maid Marian, honest friend. Because she lives a spotless maiden life; And shall, till Robin’s outlaw life have end, That he may lawfully take her to wife.”<sup>50</sup> The Marian that Munday writes remains pious, chaste, and honest throughout his two plays; she is every bit the noble lady who has followed the man she loved into exile in order to remain with him. The actions she takes are those that benefit Robin, and her association with his life of outlawry only encompasses that of wife.

The women I have discussed in this paper by no means include all of the women ever portrayed in any Robin Hood text, be it medieval or otherwise.

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<sup>50</sup> Anthony Munday, *The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntington*, in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Olghren (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), lines 1539-1542.

These female characters do, however, provide an insight into how women function in the tales of the greenwood, and the different actions the women exhibit influence the way that contemporary adaptations of Robin Hood portray female characters—particularly Maid Marian.<sup>51</sup> To return to the nineteenth-century painting of Maid Marian by William Clarke Woner, what we see is the noble, docile Marian. However, this Marian stands alone; if Robin is with her, he's not the center of the painting—for once, he stands in the periphery of the greenwood. This portrait inspired by Marian reminds us that she has certain behaviors she subscribes to, but she allows us to see that in that moment, she too can be mischievous—but this mischievousness *must* subtly function within the patriarchal structure. This stipulation extends beyond the realm of the medieval or early modern Robin Hood texts into contemporary film adaptations of Robin and Marian. The agency Marian receives in twentieth-century films depends on the specific film one views: in some, she maintains a certain level of agency (such as the 1952 version by Ken Annakin), whereas in others she has no agency of her own at all (such as the 1973 animated feature by Wolfgang Reitherman). No matter the agency she exhibits, though, Marian always acts in favor of Robin—even if she challenges his authority “we find that virtually all need rescuing at some point in [the] story.”<sup>52</sup> No matter how transgressive the women may be, there is an insistence on reinstating ascribed gender behaviors. Marian

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<sup>51</sup> An interesting article on the transgressive nature of Maid Marian in twentieth-century literature for young readers is Lorinda B. Cohoon's "Transgressive Transformations: Representations of Maid Marian in Robin Hood Retellings."

<sup>52</sup> Sherron Lux, "And the 'Reel' Maid Marian?" in *Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence, Transgression, and Justice*, ed. Thomas Hahn (2000): 156.

may be a match for Robin in “Robin Hood and Maid Marian,” but she must end the tale with her sword drawn in favor of Robin, just as Clorinda must end “Robin Hood’s Birth, Breeding, Valour, and Marriage” as his pastoral wife. The women I have laid out act differently, but end up in the same position: lover, or wife.



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